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Girls For A Change

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Last week I walked into the Santa Clara Convention Center for an event that didn't include the usual fare of high-tech company exhibit booths and Powerpoint keynotes. Rather, I walked into a wave of girl anthem and hip-hop beats and a swarm of hundreds of teen girls who were there to celebrate: themselves.

May means one thing in my world--it's always the month of the [Girls For A Change](#) (GFC) Completion Ceremony. GFC is a national organization founded in Silicon Valley that empowers girls to create social change. In my mind GFC's Completion Ceremony is not a graduation or the end of a road in any sense. Instead, it is just the beginning for these girls who for an entire school year have been given the chance and space through GFC to realize their potential. And once they do, all you can do is stand back and hope they'll have the time to email you (or assign you a cabinet seat) when they reach their goals.

Each program year, GFC kicks off with an off-the-charts Girl Summit where about 1,500 teen girls come together to learn about how they can change their worlds--inside and out. Next the girls sign up for Girl Action Teams. Partnered with two adult woman coaches and a consulting network of hundreds of power-brokers, Girl Action Teams meet every other week--sometimes more when they're on fire. Teams talk about the problems they see going down in their lives, communities and world. But they don't stop at talking. Next, they dig deeper to explore the root causes of these social problems. And once they hit pay dirt, they design, fund and implement a project to create lasting social change.

Among the creative projects that GFC teams have spearheaded (presidential candidates, take note) are multimedia presentations and magazines to educate their peers and younger kids about how to deal with peer pressure, prevent teen pregnancy or love their bodies. And because these girls enjoy a good show and know how to engage their audiences, many of their projects are artistic. Some write and perform skits or create murals about, for example, the impact of dating or gang violence. Other projects center around community events to raise awareness and start a dialogue about global issues like human trafficking or the genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan.

All told, Girl Action Teams have implemented hundreds of projects that, frankly, help me sleep better at night. Because I know these girls are doing the hard work to transform our world--and girl culture--that I don't have the energy to do alone or even with a band of other really connected women. They aren't following our lead, they are taking the lead with our support. The thing is, these days, a lot of people worry a lot about teen "girls gone wild." So when I travel the country talking and listening to girls and their advocates, I always get asked: What can we do? My easy answer: Hook them up with an organization like GFC so they can be "girls gone powerful" instead.

Yet, without GFC many of the innovative girls who were celebrating at the completion ceremony wouldn't have been tapped as leaders of social change. Many of these girls are first-generation Americans or come from communities with limited opportunities and resources (yes, even in Silicon Valley). Many just don't have the day-to-day support we all need to make it big. This is why GFC is a much-needed intervention and beacon of hope for them. After discovering new strengths through their participation in GFC, before they can vote these same girls have snagged the ear of a governor, landed an internship at a Fortune 500 company or enrolled in a top university.

That's the thing about GFC that gets under my skin and has kept me volunteering with the org for more than four years. Girls For A Change is not just about inspiring girls to make a change. It's about letting girls know that they are a worthy investment across the board. It's about, simply, asking girls what they think and actually listening. It's about noticing that as the girls work together to create change, they change. Actually, they don't change, they just discover what was already there deep inside. Which is entirely the point. They learn about who they are, what they care about, and why they matter. They come to understand what they won't stand for and what they'll stand against together. They create a vision for their lives and our world. They shine in a way that no bling around their neck could ever shine.

You know, just a few weeks ago, I had the honor of hearing Yolanda King speak at a [community nonviolence conference](#) in San Jose. By my side were two amazing young women who are on the GFC Girl Steering Committee, Jennifer Uribe and Natasha Gonzalez. The day prior, Jennifer had also worked with Ms. King, Arun Gandhi, Ela Gandhi, Dr. Bernard Lafayette, Jr., Paul Chavez, Richard Chavez, Dolores Huerta and others, as part of a related youth summit focused on creating their vision for nonviolence.

The same night Ms. King died suddenly, these same two young women were at the helm of the GFC Completion Ceremony. Natasha was on stage firing up the crowd and leading the ceremony as an emcee, while Jennifer was behind the scenes helping run the event which had more than 500 girls, parents, coaches and community leaders in attendance. As Ms. King and her father had done, these young women were using their voices and passion to inspire their generation. And now I can't help but feel the significance that they were with Ms. King during one of her last live social change events. After all, the title of that conference was "Carry the Vision."

And that is what girls in GFC are doing today. They are carrying the vision. More importantly, they are creating their own vision. They have picked up the torch and are running with it--with their leadership the flame of social change doesn't go out, it just gets brighter. And so it seems all I have left to say after an amazing night like GFC's Completion Ceremony followed by the sad news of Ms. King's passing is this: Shine on sisters, shine on.





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